

**Consideration of Significance for the *Ch'u'itnu* Archaeological District Under  
Criterion A for the National Register of Historic Places: the case**

The *Ch'u'itnu* Archaeological District was determined to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places with consensus of the Alaska State Historic Preservation Officer during 2006. The District was determined eligible under Criterion D because it was felt to contain information significant to study about the prehistoric and historic life ways of the Denaina people in the Cook Inlet area (SRB&A 2006:58).

Consideration of archaeological properties under Criterion D is common at the determination of eligibility stage because it provides quick, easy justification for protection of a resource for future planning and development. Significance for the potential to yield information about prehistory or history (Criterion D) does not always show what area of importance and type of information the resource can provide. Mitigation of adverse effects to resources often takes the form of archaeological excavation and curation of findings as the standard method of protection. The choice of research design aimed at the area of most significance is not always selected during mitigation. Establishing a complete statement of the highest value for a property is important to forming efficient and proper mitigation procedures.

Recent studies about the importance of the area around the proposed Chuitna Coal Mine and associated support facilities by Braund and Associates and by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game Subsistence Division document that traditional subsistence activities are notably important to the Natives of Tyonek Village(see below). These studies demonstrate the importance of the area to the villagers and make data found in the archaeological remains of the District very valuable to unraveling past subsistence practices and trends (Criterion A).

The various sites identified in the District display a strong pattern of having each site contain multiple house depressions. The houses at each site were radiocarbon dated and show the individual houses were constructed at differing times from other pits at that site. Some clusters of houses (in a single site) had individual houses which dated to about A.D. 1500, A.D. 1600, A.D. 1700 and A.D. 1800. That pattern suggests the Denaina occupants periodically returned to the same locations and built new houses next to older abandoned houses. The same pattern is repeated in many sites in the District

The identification of archaeological remains in the *Ch'u'itnu* Archaeological District by SRB & Associates followed a methodology that entailed mapping and testing each surface feature located. The testing procedure was intended to collect charcoal for determining the age of the features and 50 centimeter square test pits were placed in the center of main rooms of house depressions. The center of the main room is typically the location of the hearth and a logical place to find charcoal for dating. Hearths in Denaina houses frequently also contain

small fragments of bone or bone meal that cannot be identified to species. Fifty-seven houses yielded charcoal and bone fragments, the latter usually un-identifiable other than as mammal, bird or occasionally fish. Seven houses tested also yielded un-identifiable marine shell fragments. Eight more houses yielded charcoal for dating but no faunal remains from the small test pits.

A single house, HP-35, was excavated by trenching and during a second season, testing was extended outside the house depression to explore associated features. The second season effort uncovered the refuse midden deposit which contained faunal remains. Results of testing in and around HP35 provided 41 mammal bone fragments and 2 bird bone fragments. Flotation of sediments from the hearth provided 7 of the bone fragments. The results from expanded testing demonstrate the value of examining areas beyond the hearth deposits and outside the house depressions. The HP-35 feature was occupied between A.D. 1618 and A.D. 1737. 2008 also saw more houses at other sites from the various time periods also tested to obtain datable material and sample contents of the houses. Faunal remains were found in a number of houses but were fragmentary and not readily identifiable to the species level. Shell fragments, probably razor clam, beaver, porcupine, hare, various bird bones, salmon, halibut and small fish, probably trout have been found (SRB&A 2009:55)..

The limited data gathered thus far clearly demonstrate that the scattered groups of houses and the houses within the groups are very distinct. No one house tested can be construed to represent all the others. Further testing of other houses and associated middens is necessary to adequately evaluate significance and to demonstrate the scientific potential of the District. The Denaina people used the same area through time, at least 3 to 4 centuries, as a base for subsistence activities. Modern subsistence studies (Stanek, Holen, and Wassillie, 2007; SRB&A, 2007) recorded in the communities of Tyonek and Beluga document importance of the area for moose hunting, harvest of fur bearers and small mammals, fishing for salmon and trout in the nearby Chuitna River, upland bird hunting, and berry picking. Fishing camps were remembered along the Cook Inlet shore in historic times. The name for a former village site near the mouth of the Chuitna River, *Ch'u'itnu Hdakaq*, translated as "River Mouth" or Ladd (Kari and Fall 2003:68). The *Ch'u'itnu* Archaeological District lies immediately north of the location called Ladd and may be an extension of that historic village. Larger lakes in the vicinity also had Denaina names which translated to meanings with reference to trout and salmon fishing (ibid.:69).

The above information demonstrates that biological data can be obtained through testing beyond small excavations at the center of house main rooms. Unfortunately, only one of the houses identified was tested beyond the small excavations in hearths to collect charcoal. An accurate idea of the amount of biological information relevant to subsistence activities needs additional testing of midden areas and house floors outside the main hearth. Association of the archaeological features in the *Ch'u'itnu* Archaeological District with past subsistence practices

has been suggested by work to date. Additional data are needed to reliably document the association.

A program of expanded testing at house depressions of different ages, addressing other areas in houses than the hearth and of outside midden deposits, should provide proof of the association. Further analysis of existing data may also help demonstrate the association with historic subsistence patterns. Such re-analysis should concentrate on identifiable remains. The level of additional effort to provide data in support of a positive determination of eligibility under Criterion A need not be exhaustive. Selection of various aged house depressions at several sites in the District for expanded testing of faunal remains would suffice. Five to ten structures would be a reasonable sample of the whole for eligibility consideration. That supporting data will also allow appropriate mitigation of project impacts to be determined.

Boundaries of the District have not been defined. The reason that the many house and cache depressions are concentrated in the area around Ladd Landing seems to be due to several reasons. Nearby subsistence resources were particularly rich, good drainage and relatively higher topography make the area suitable for construction of semi-subterranean houses, and proximity to the shore of Cook Inlet provided good travel routes to other areas. The defining boundary criteria may be that the area of concentration is bounded on the north and west by extensive swampy terrain. The eastern boundary would be the Cook Inlet beaches. A southern boundary for the District cannot be defined because survey for cultural features in that direction was artificially restricted by terms of the research contract. A defined district boundary is not required for determining eligibility but would allow proper judging of impacts by a project on the overall district value.

Reliance on local flora and fauna has been a long time and continuing pattern of subsistence for the Denaina of Tyonek. The *Ch'u'itnu* Archaeological District essentially constitutes a dispersed settlement area that is clearly associated with the long held cultural heritage. The District should be considered to be eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A because of that association. The importance of districts like this is emphasized in the Alaska Historic Preservation Plan which identified the important organizational theme "Survival and Adaptation". The planning theme includes historic properties which deal with traditional Native Alaskan life ways.

More field research into the presence, kinds and quality of subsistence data remains in District sites is necessary for establishing the final importance of the property. More midden areas and activity areas between cultural features should be examined for fuller understanding of the village area. More detailed information contained in individual house groups is needed to assess any impacts of construction to the District and to devise any mitigation of the foreseen impacts.

## References Cited

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